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Yours Truly MF

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Yours Truly MF

by

Michelle E. Florence

Under the Direction of Christina West

ABSTRACT

Yours Truly MF is both the title of this exhibition and the identity through which I create and share my work. At its root is a query of the role and function of art and artist. This work is the fruition of my journey to come to terms with being a contemporary artist working in ceramics by examining the visual vocabulary of my art as product and the aesthetic of affluence in which it may exist. By creating context for my work; art objects, digital media and technology function as equalizers, subverting contemporary ideals of wealth and exclusivity. Fine art is a luxury. In luxury is quality, an exemplifier of our greatest potential, yet its commodification and exclusiveness can be base and at times even vulgar. My goal with *Yours Truly MF* is to embrace those contradictions and celebrates what it is to be crude but classy.

INDEX WORDS: Luxury, Ceramics, Porcelain, Design, Contemporary art

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by

Michelle E. Florence

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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Georgia State University

2018

Yours Truly MF

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May 2018

DEDICATION

To my parents and the handful of hardy souls who stood by and endured this endeavor with me,

in the immortal words of *Bartles & Jaymes*:

“Thank you for your support.”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My undying gratitude to the brilliant designers and engineers at Bose Corporation whose talent and ingenuity made noise canceling headphones a barely affordable reality.

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INTRODUCTION

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,
 I sought it daily for six weeks or so.
 Maybe at last, being but a broken man,
 I must be satisfied with my heart, although
 Winter and summer till old age began
 My circus animals were all on show,
 Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot,
 Lion and woman and the Lord knows what.

—first stanza, “The Circus Animal’s Desertion,” by William Butler Yeats¹

One of my favorite poems, *The Circus Animals Desertion*, is a poem in which an elderly Yeats reflects on inspiration through the lack thereof. In place of fresh inspiration, he muses on past works. These are his circus animals and in old age they, like inspiration, inevitably desert him. Although my life long creative endeavors are not at an end, in concluding my academic undertakings and considering my own work, the analogy of the circus animals rings true. My circus animals are now on show. They are the fruition of my journey to come to terms with being a contemporary artist working in my chosen material of ceramics. Their purpose is to examine the visual vocabulary of art as product as well as the aesthetic of affluence in which they may exist. *Yours Truly MF* is both the title of this exhibition and the identity through which I create and share my work. At its root is a query of the role and function of art and artist. By creating context for these works, traditional art objects, digital media and technology function as equalizers, subverting contemporary ideals of affluence and exclusivity. More often than not, fine art is a luxury for the privileged few. In luxury is quality, an exemplifier of our greatest potential, yet its

commodification and exclusiveness can be base and at times even vulgar. My goal with *Yours Truly MF* is to embrace those contradictions and celebrate what it is to be crude but classy.

1 BACKGROUND

In 1979 the compilation *Bugs Bunny/Roadrunner Movie* was released and contained a cartoon short that has become for me the quintessential parody of highbrow culture. “What’s Opera Doc?” featuring Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd in a spoof of German classical composer, Richard Wagner’s *Ring Cycle* opera would set the bar for my own artistic endeavors nearly forty years later. Directed by Chuck Jones the seven-minute short always struck me as visually more distinct than other Bugs Bunny adventures. Later I would come to realize the artists were not only parodying opera but also fine art. The seductively plump and curvaceous horse ridden by Bugs Bunny calls to mind Rubens while the pair together are a particular delicious parody of Paul Manship’s art deco *Flight of Europa*. Long before I ever came to appreciate the nuances of Jones’ work, *Looney Tunes* and *The Bugs Bunny/Roadrunner Show* were a Saturday morning staple. In my formative years, before preschool and kindergarten, before language in the form of reading and writing was drilled into me, the visual language of absurd chases and bombastic characters was the filter through which I navigated the world. On a visceral and immediate level my work today is still very much a product of that visual vocabulary.



Figure 1. “What’s Opera Doc?” dir. Chuck Jones, Warner Bros. Cartoons. 1957.



Figure 2. Paul Manship, “Flight of Europa,” Bronze, (20 ½” × 31” × 9”). 1925.

In his autobiography, *Chuck Amuck: Life and Times of an Animated Cartoonist*, Jones wrote, “we made pictures for ourselves, believing with childlike innocence that if we laughed at and with each other, others perhaps would follow.”² It is with that same childlike innocence I make my own work. For me comedy is a salve. It is both my critical voice and my coping mechanism when faced with life’s inherent absurdity. For me comedy also becomes a means of self-reflection and a means to reflect on society at large. Early on in my creative career I realized that ultimately I was creating self-portraits: representational objects of myself in a particular moment in time. Self-deprecating humor diffuses my underlying angst with the status quo and acknowledges that if I can’t laugh at myself, what right do I have to poke fun of others? In the *Hyperallergic* essay “When Great Art Makes You LOL,” Alicia Eler and Alex Huntsberger write, “...here’s the thing about comedy: it relies on the subverting of expectations, which means that it cannot exist without them.”³ The underlying core of my work is expectations, as both the root of my ire and my greatest source of inspiration.

When I first began working in ceramics as an undergraduate in 2011, my work was reactionary and metaphorical. Having spent the majority of my adult life with little if any connection to the art world,

I was struck by how absurd and narcissistic art could be when contrasted with the harsher realities of my own personal economic survival and the gravity and turmoil of our existence as a species at large. Prior to pursuing my Bachelor's degree, I struggled financially for many years. Since 2002, living hand to mouth financially on the razor's edge of no work, no pay, no health insurance, has been the norm for me. I lost nearly a dozen friends in less than ten years to illness, violence, and addiction. Then the Great Recession cut my annual income in half. School and the accompanying financial aid was as much a sanctuary as it was a desperate means of betterment. Suddenly I was immersed in the relatively privileged world of academia discussing the finer points Carl Andre's *Bricks* and watching fellow students cry in the studio over a broken pot. The absurdity for me was palpable. More often than not this absurdity colored my thoughts and language with metaphors as immediate visceral reactions to my environment. These metaphors became vivid images in mind. In clay I made the images real. Each piece then became a snapshot of both a moment in my life and part of a recurring internal dialog about art, my chosen material, its history, and contemporary assumptions of value. This dialog remains at the heart of my practice today.

Human beings have manipulated and fired clay for 30,000 years. The existence of ceramic material is testimony to human existence. On one hand, I take solace in thinking that I'm part of the long dirty line of human beings who have played with clay and that in 10,000 years some part of me will live on in a perplexing jigsaw puzzle of enduring sherds. On the other hand, ceramic's long history and ubiquity in everyday society leaves me as an artist feeling somewhat burdened by its associative baggage. From the beginning I have found myself conflicted by cliché assumptions. Ceramic material is everywhere, it's probably not much of an exaggeration to say that nearly every human being on the planet comes in physical contact with ceramics on a daily basis. Its varied forms range from nano-tech car paint and high performance ball bearings, to coffee mugs, grandma's china, tchotchke figurines, and the ever present toilet. Everyone "knows" this material and of course as someone working in ceramics I must obviously be fulfilling some form of "handicraft" expectations. My contrarian nature challenged, it

became one of my unspoken rules to try to push the material out the popular notions of what it should be, i.e., glazed, predictably decorative or functional, and appropriate in both content and scale for the tabletop, curio cabinet, or mantel. Nevertheless, my desire has never been to deny ceramics its contemporary associations and long colorful history. On the contrary, from very early on I saw this “baggage” as rich source material for posing broader social and cultural questions.

One of my first forays into ceramic history quickly became a vehicle for me to express my reactions to not only being a ceramic artist but also wider socioeconomic concerns as they relate to material associations. Created in 2011, *Bacchus: Self Portrait No. 1*, a white glazed figurine of Godzilla holding a martini glass and a cigarette approximately 17” in height is my first ceramic piece to reference Meissen porcelain. Founded in 1710 in the town of Meissen, the Staatliche Porzellan-Manufaktur Meissen, is the state porcelain manufacture of Germany. Still operating today, its founder Johann Böttger, was the first European to [re]invent the recipe for porcelain. Up until 1710, porcelain was a rare and luxurious commodity produced only in the Orient. Worth more than gold, porcelain or “white gold” was a status symbol for royalty and Europe’s elite. As one of the first true expressions of consumerism and the large scale consumption of luxury products the Meissen porcelain factory brought white gold to the masses—or at the very least the upper middle class. My rendition of Godzilla in the style and manner of Meissen’s ‘Royal Menagerie’ became for me an absurd expression of consumer culture as a drunken monster of humanity’s own making. As a self-portrait it is a narrative of my feeling both intoxicated with creative energy and little bit dangerous and out of place as a nearly forty-year-old art school undergrad. With this piece I began to realize one of my impulses to create with ceramics comes from both the desire to express material sumptuousness and the need to undermine the ostentatiousness it can invoke.



Figure 3. Michelle E. Florence, “Bacchus: Self Portrait No. 1,” Glazed earthenware, (12” x 12” x 17”). 2011.



Figure 4. “King Vulture,” Meissen porcelain, Christie's Images Ltd. 1731.

Meissen became part of my visual vocabulary to question consumer culture. A year later in 2012, I continued to use this vocabulary with my piece, *Thé de Toilette: Self Portrait No. 2*. At 30" in height, approximate of a contemporary toilet, this piece is a large teapot with a small toilet incorporated into the top on which I perched a figure of myself using said toilet. In the figure's hands is a typical commercial coffee cup and on her face an expression of befuddlement as she sits sideways to avoid the elongated spout of the teapot. The form and style of the coffee pot is an imitation of a Meissen teapot I saw for auction on eBay. Numerous appraisals on the TV program "The Antique's Road Show" have brought a contemporary awareness of Meissen to the contemporary masses and at the same time reinforced its perception as tchotchke, so much so that even Walmart sells books on its history, yet Meissen remains a luxury product. This began my interest in the interplay of material value, aesthetics, and social status. *Thé de Toilette* is made of porcelaneous stoneware glazed white. Initially I intended to add gold luster and floral decals in imitation of the original teapot. I then refrained, thinking the white glaze would tie more directly to my bathroom humor questioning the seemingly outrageous amounts of money people were willing to spend on items made of the same material as a common toilet. Ironically, this bathroom aesthetic further reflected and heightened the effect of porcelain's timeless opulent appeal reinforcing my desire to create objects of beauty as well as thought provoking content.



Figure 5. Michelle E. Florence, “Thé de Toilette:Self Portrait No. 2,” Porcelaineous stoneware, (24”x20”x30”). 2012.

In conjunction with my research into Meissen I was also becoming more aware of trends in contemporary ceramics that provided fodder for me to push the material and question other preconceived notions of value. My mentor at the time, Andr ea Keys Connell, was challenging perceptions of scale in her figurative work while posters of Beth Cavener Stichter’s enormous ceramic sculptures of rabbits and wolves and goats lined the studio hallway. In the spring of 2013, I attended my first National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) conference and in one of my first conversations there I heard “go big or go home.” I became intrigued by the assumption of value applied to scale in art and

specifically ceramic sculpture. In my internal dialog about art a little voice taunted me, so long as it's big, does it really matter what it is? I can no longer remember where exactly the idea of a giant iguana on roller skates came from, but once the image lodged itself in my mind I knew I had to make it. Six feet long, three feet wide, and over four feet tall (including the LED disco floor pedestal), *Incense Burner (How do you like me now?): Self Portrait No. 5*, is both functional and completely absurd. In its immediate visceral reaction to jaded art world clichés and contemporary ceramic trendiness, it is a heartfelt acknowledgement and celebration of my inner “child of the 70’s” four-year-old. As a self-portrait it also personifies all the celebration and bravado of embarking on a new phase in my life while capturing my sense of awkwardness and uncertainty of where exactly I’ll find my niche as an emerging artist. In terms of material handling this piece is pivotal to shaping my current approach to the ceramic object as not simply the end all be all of my creative endeavors but rather as the means to an end. Through function, scale, trompe l’oeil surface treatment, and the incorporation of non-ceramic materials and technology I sought to challenge the viewer’s preconceived notions of what ceramics should be with the potential of what it could be as a sumptuous and absurd testimony to my own resilience.



Figure 6. Andréa Keys Connell, “Boreas,” Clay, 2014.



Figure 7. Beth Cavener, “In Boca al Lupo,” Clay, (56” x 84” x 24”). 2012.



Figure 8. Michelle E. Florence, “Incense Burner (How do you like me now?): Self Portrait No. 5,” Stoneware, (36”x72”x55”). 2014.



Figure 9. Michelle E. Florence, “Incense Burner (How do you like me now?): Self Portrait No. 5,” Stoneware, (36”x72”x55”). Detail. 2014.



Figure 10. Michelle E. Florence, “Incense Burner (How do you like me now?): Self Portrait No. 5,” Stoneware, (36”x72”x55”). Detail. 2014.

2 INFLUENCES

As my undergraduate work progressed it began to be compared to the work of Jeff Koons. Initially, I thought little of it. I did some cursory research (i.e., I googled images of his work) and found for the most part I enjoyed his use of materiality in conjunction with pop culture objects and assumed it was in some form a critique of consumerism, which of course related to my own work. In graduate school my examination of Koons became more in depth, and while I share his enthusiasm for detail and creating art that is on some level accessible by all, I question his rhetoric when discussing his own work. Considering he is the producer of some of the most expensive fine art in the world his declaration that, “[Making art] is an opportunity to show respect,” and “[an opportunity] —to show a sense of equality, importance, and trust” is patronizing at best.⁴ Making art is an opportunity most often limited to those privileged enough to afford the education and resources to do so. I am inclined to agree with Peter Schjeldahl from *The New Yorker*, when he writes of Koons’ work: “It apostrophizes our present era of plutocratic democracy, sinking scads of money in a gesture of solidarity with lower-class taste.”⁵ While I am not one to safely throw stones at privilege or lower-class taste, Koons reinforces my belief that the value of art has a critical function in society, despite the artist’s masturbatory observations and declarations to the contrary.⁶



Figure 11. Jeff Koons, “Michael Jackson and Bubbles,” Porcelain, (42”x70½”x32 ½”). 1988.

Celebrity notwithstanding, Koons' success as an artist is of greater interest to me than the success (or failure) of his work. His business acumen, like his art, is revered by some and reviled by others. Through adept self-marketing and his use of art fabrication, the outsourced often industrial production of art by specialists other than the artist, he exemplifies my belief that in a consumer driven society art is product. Koons reinforced this belief in 2017 when he began a collaboration with the luxury brand Louis Vuitton to produce exclusive bags. The idea that luxury and fine art go hand-in-hand seems obvious enough, however until recently the two institutions existed separately as either retail commerce or the art market as manifest in museums and art galleries. Recent studies have shown, "luxury stores are becoming hybrid institutions, embodying elements of both art galleries and museums, within a context of exclusivity emblematic of luxury" and that this hybrid is part of an "aesthetically oriented strategy" wherein; "Objects for sale are displayed alongside actual art, rendering both products equivalent."⁷ This convergence of luxury retail and fine art shifted how I visualized my work existing in the world. I began creating images in Photoshop incorporating my work into luxury settings to push their relevance as art objects beyond commentary on social and material values to actively subverting those values as functional and decorative elements within the context of affluent exclusivity.



Figure 12. Louis Vuitton "Masters Campaign," Featuring Jeff Koons. Screenshot. 2018.



Figure 13. Michelle Florence, Photoshop mock-up. 2017.

Koons and this “highly successful incorporation of art and art patronage within [Louis Vuitton’s] brand identity” also shifted how I visualized myself existing as an artist in today’s world.⁸ In my first year of graduate school I read an article in *The Atlantic* titled, “Death of the Artist—and Birth of the Creative Entrepreneur,” by William Deresiewicz. The title says it all. In summation, Deresiewicz catalogs all the various paradigms in which artists have existed through the ages and concludes that we are in the midst of another paradigm shift. He writes: “Now it’s not an audience you think of addressing; it’s a customer base,” and as a “creative type... you’re supposed to build your brand, your network, your social-media presence.”⁸ With Koons, Louis Vutton (LV), and Deresiewicz in mind as well as other popular persona/brands such as Michael Kors (MK) and Donna Karan New York (DKNY), I created my own moniker incorporating my initials: *Yours Truly MF (YTMF)*. While still nascent as a brand, this primarily online identity provides separation of my personal and professional presence in addition to being a tongue in cheek parody of contemporary branding. As the title of this exhibition *Yours Truly MF (YTMF)* captures both the sincerity with which I create my work and my subversive intent in its presentation.

3 CURRATION

In curating my exhibition, I realized upon installation that rather than thinking of my work as multiple distinct pieces, they are in fact three chronological installations. The first of which, *Floor Lamp: "Konichiwa Bitches," Self Portrait No. 8*, was conceived in part at the beginning of my graduate school experience. The completed leg lamp with pedestal stands at approximately 84" with a 36" diameter lampshade. The lamp base is a 60" ceramic rendering of a toy Godzilla leg wearing a very "blingy" gold high heel shoe, otherwise known as a "Fuck Me Pump" (FMP), and is wired with two LED smart-bulbs, one internally lighting the hollow of the leg and one on top in conjunction with the lampshade. The smart-bulbs change colors and can be synchronized to music through Bluetooth and a smartphone app. The lamp stands on a deerskin rug atop a rectangular low white pedestal. On one wall is a print of *The Robb Report* magazine cover in a 20" by 24" gold frame featuring an image of the lamp in a luxury living room setting. On another wall is a flat screen 42" monitor looping a short video titled *Thank you. Have a nice day. (Part I)* featuring the Etsy.com storefront of "Yours Truly MF" with the lamp for sale. The leg lamp is of course a direct reference to the famous pop culture leg lamp in the 1980's movie *A Christmas Story*. The deerskin, while adding to the luxury aesthetic is an allusion to a 1969 Marv Newland animated short, *Bambi Meets Godzilla*. The title, *Konichiwa Bitches*, is also a pop-culture reference derived from comedian Dave Chappelle's 2004 sketch "The Racial Draft."⁹



Figure 14. "A Christmas Story," directed by Bob Clark, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. 1983.

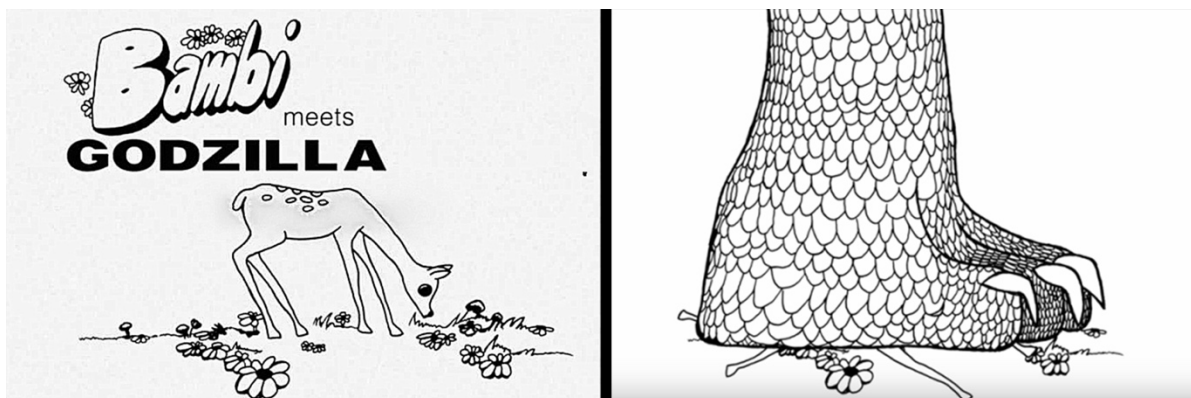


Figure 15. “Bambi Meets Godzilla,” written and directed by Marv Newland, Animated short film. 1969.

“Konichiwa” means “bye-bye” in Japanese and in many respects the leg lamp is a farewell for me as an artist. Creating large ceramic sculptures demands a great deal of time and resources. I recognized early on the opportunity to make large work after graduate school would be potentially limited and approached the undertaking as a “last hurrah.” The visual for a giant toy Godzilla leg wearing a high heel shoe came out of a conversation, in what context I can no longer remember, although Godzilla, like Bugs Bunny, is deeply rooted in my childhood visual vocabulary. As a self-portrait the leg lamp captures my feelings of being out of sorts with my new role as a graduate student. Like my previous Godzilla self-portrait there is a sense of celebratory energy combined with danger in the self-acknowledgement of my tendency to embark on new adventures with all the subtlety of a radioactive dinosaur. On the heels of the presidential election wherein this country’s first female candidate was defeated I began to see it as social commentary as well. Godzilla after all is female, and a very strong and assertive one at that. The original leg lamp is the literal objectification of a woman into a functional domestic item. In my appropriation of this objectification I am reflecting on the latent societal of women in American popular culture. There still exists today the tendency to vilify strong assertive women who defy their domestic role. Hillary Clinton became a monster as threatening as Godzilla in the view of many and on the other hand, women who objectify themselves by wearing FMPs and use femininity as a means to an end are often seen as equally monstrous.



Figure 16. Michelle E. Florence, "Floor Lamp: 'Konichiwa Bitches,' Self Portrait No. 8," Ceramic, mixed media, (36"x 84"x 36"). 2017.

In my mind's eye, long before I completed the leg lamp I visualized it executed with the same attention to detail and material sumptuousness that I applied to my previous *Incense Burner* piece. Material “sexiness” emphasizes absurdity, it functions as the comedic straight man to a piece’s form and content. However, given the challenges of creating such a piece quickly in conjunction with the graduate school curriculum I found it necessary to communicate my vision through a two-dimensional Photoshop rendering. This was yet another impetus for experimenting with context. In conjunction with my observations about Koons, the paradigm shift described by Deresiewicz and my belief that art is product I decided to create the fantasy of my work as product through appropriating the visual and literal language of luxury. With *The Robb Report*, I appropriated the cover of a well-established luxury lifestyle magazine and featured my leg lamp as the latest in high-end affluent home decorating. I made little to no change to the actual language and features described on the original cover. In framing the cover and showing it with the actual leg lamp the intent is to increase the object’s value through provenance. The pop culture references, social commentary and sheer absurdity of the leg lamp placed in contrast with an affluent environment subverts exclusivity and functions as an equalizer making the aesthetic accessible to all. Likewise, the Thank you. *Have a nice day. (Part I)* video featuring the leg lamp for sale on Etsy.com functions as equalizer taking art out of the rarified world of exclusive auction houses and galleries while at the same time exemplifying the role of the artist as “creative entrepreneur.”



Figure 17. Michelle E. Florence, “Floor Lamp: ‘Konichiwa Bitches,’ Self Portrait No. 8,” Ceramic, mixed media, (36”x 84”x 36”). Detail. 2017.

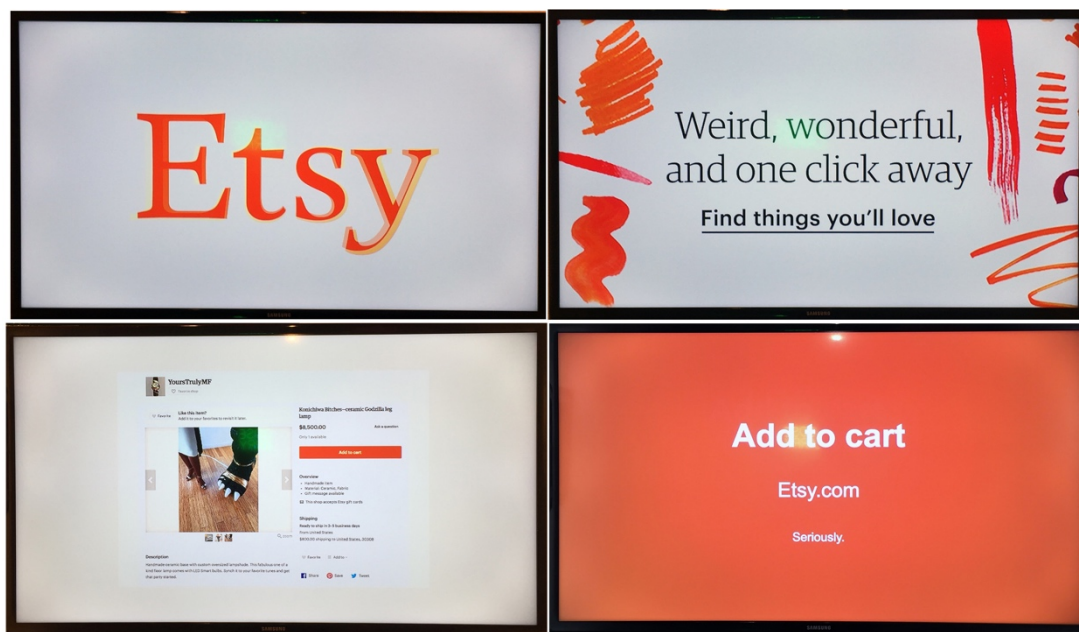


Figure 18. Michelle Florence. “Thank you. Have a nice day. (Part I),” Video, 2018.

In addition to having the leg lamp for sale on Etsy, the central piece in my second installation, *Home Security Camera: “My First Selfie,” Self Portrait No. 9* is also featured in *Thank you. Have a nice day. (Part I)*. The looping video is an aesthetic solution to the technical challenge of poor WiFi in the gallery and functions as self-marketing encouraging viewers to “Add to cart.” On the title card is a QR code directly linking to the actual “Yours Truly MF” Etsy storefront. As an artist working in ceramics Etsy represents the artisanal trope of the material as manifest in the site’s past trendiness within certain aspects of the ceramic community. In terms of content *My First Selfie* is also obviously about trendiness. The central object in the installation is a life-size ceramic rendering of the lower torso of a figure with jeans around the ankles exposing its ass to the viewer. The figure is painted with white milk paint and burnished to a soft satin luster akin to marble or porcelain. It appears to be standing on a 36” floating shelf the approximate height of a fireplace mantel. Between the figure’s knees is an iPhone replica in a gold and rhinestone case. In the iPhone replica, in place of a real iPhone camera lens, is a wireless camera linked to a digital tablet on the shelf providing a real-time albeit slightly delayed video of the viewer. On the wall to the right of the figure is a framed *Architectural Digest* magazine cover featuring the figure on

a fireplace mantel in an affluent living room as the “Fanny Nanny Cam” and referring to it as the “chic new look” in home surveillance. To the left of the figure/shelf ensemble in its own spot light is a larger image of the figure on the fireplace mantel framed in an off white plastic Rococo oval frame.



Figure 19. Michelle E. Florence, “Home Security Camera: ‘My First Selfie,’ Self Portrait No. 9,” Ceramic, mixed media, (10”x15”x30”). 2018.



Figure 20. Michelle E. Florence, “Home Security Camera: ‘My First Selfie,’ Self Portrait No. 9,” Ceramic, mixed media, (10”x15”x30”). Detail. 2018.

As self-portrait this piece was born out of a visceral reaction to the myopic tendencies and condescending intellectual elitism I perceived in academia and the art world at large. My inclusion into that community through the quasi ritualized hazing of graduate school left me feeling both exposed and recalcitrant. With only one hand visible I leave it open to interpretation whether or not the figure is grabbing its ankles or defiantly showing its ass. The polished white finish as well as the notion of defiance carry over into a broader conversation of the idealized aesthetic of the nude figure in art and subvert the power of the gaze through mockery. The overall aesthetic of the installation is designed to mirror that of the image of the figure on a fireplace mantel in the *Architectural Digest* cover. The figure's position on the mantel is a nod to its materiality and the notion of the fireplace mantel as a place to display fine decorative ceramics. Its functionality as a home surveillance device, or "Fanny Nanny Cam," however undermines the preciousness of such objects while ironically providing for its own security. The iPhone and digital tablet are ubiquitous in today's selfie obsessed society and their incorporation force the viewer to reflect on their own narcissistic inclinations. Their presence is also symbolic of popular culture and combined with the figure's absurd function, serve as equalizers once again subverting affluence and making its aesthetic accessible to all. Last but not least the larger image of the figure on the fireplace mantel in the plastic Rococo oval frame plays into the luxury aesthetic while performing as a shameless example of product propagation along the lines of similar practices by artists such as Jeff Koons.



Figure 21. Michelle E. Florence, "Home Security Camera: 'My First Selfie,' Self Portrait No. 9," Ceramic, mixed media, (10"x15"x30"). Detail. 2018.

Again with Koons and Deresiewicz in mind, my approach to creating my final installation, *Kinder Froh Series: "Kinder Froh," "Qu'est-ce que c'est?" "Coquette," "Schadenfreude," Self Portrait No. 10*, was more inspired by business than art. For much of my time in graduate school I felt the economics of being an artist was flawed. With ceramics in general and my process in particular creating artwork is a huge investment of expertise, labor and personal finances on materials and resources. All of which is given eagerly in the hopes of "fortune and glory," but at best results in a financial windfall that in all likelihood as an emerging artist will barely cover material costs let alone make a profit. This financial anxiety ties into my already stated concerns about future access to the facilities and resources needed to make my work. Shortly after I began experimenting with images of my work in Photoshop I also discovered a digital 3D application that enable me to intuitively create, manipulate and photo realistically render three dimensional digital objects. With the rapid progress and integration of technologies such as virtual reality, augmented reality and 3D printing, developing my digital skills seemed a wise investment in my future while also providing the means to produce detailed renderings of my creative ideas without all the studio overhead. This process also gave me greater freedom to contextualize my art objects in potentially unlimited scenarios. One of the first digital objects I created was a rendering of a gummy bear, in part as homage to my childhood, and in part because I found a tutorial for a 3D gummy bear on YouTube. This same gummy bear, with some artistic license, has become the focal point for my final installation, *Kinder Froh Series: "Kinder Froh," "Qu'est-ce que c'est?" "Coquette," "Schadenfreude," Self Portrait No. 10*.

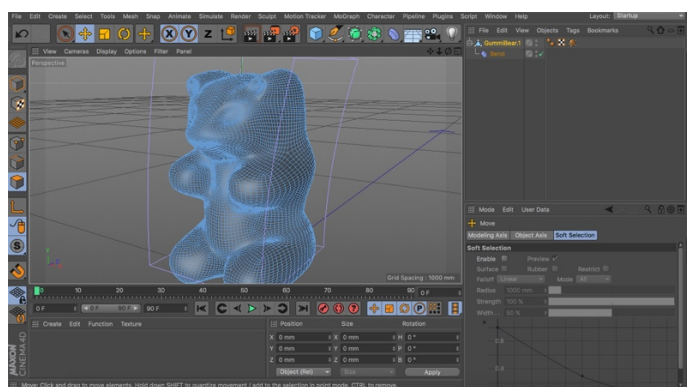


Figure 22. Gummy bear model in 3D application Cinema 4D, v18. Screenshot. 2018.

From the outset I always visualized my digital gummy bear as ceramic. In fact, I attempted a porcelain gummy bear my first year of graduate school, unfortunately it cracked during firing and I do not consider it a successful piece. My first digital rendering consisted of three porcelain gummy bears in various poses supporting a glass tabletop. The concept of large fine white porcelain gummy bears functioning as the base of a coffee table fit the content and aesthetics of my other exhibition pieces; however, actually producing large gummy bears to scale in true porcelain with the resources at hand would be time consuming, expensive and technically difficult if not impossible—porcelain is notoriously temperamental and prone to warping and cracking. Realizing this concept piece was integral to the exhibition I toyed with the idea that it could remain purely digital, but since materiality is such an important aspect of my other work this leap seemed too drastic. This shifted my approach to instead producing a scaled-down maquette which in turn opened the door to 3D printing. When I scaled the gummy bears down to a little under six inches to fit within the physical and budgetary constraints of 3D printing I realized once printed in porcelain, rather than being a maquette, they were in fact figurines. In creating figurines, I had come full circle back to my very first piece, *Bacchus: Self Portrait No. 1*, and once again the historic German porcelain manufacturer, Meissen, becomes part of the conversation.



Figure 23. Michelle Florence, “Gummy Bear Coffee Table,” Computer rendering. 2017.

The central feature of my installation *Kinder Froh Series*: “*Kinder Froh*,” “*Qu’est-ce que c’est?*” “*Coquette*,” “*Schadenfreude*,” *Self Portrait No. 10*, is four 5 ½” 3D printed porcelain gummy bears and a white, gold trimmed clamshell jewelry case with a 3D printed white nylon plastic gummy bear pendant on a gold chain. The four gummy bears sit in a line on a white pedestal topped with architectural trim mirroring the floating shelf in the *My First Selfie* installation. The third gummy bear from the left sits reversed, its back to the viewer, with the open pendant case angled on the right-hand corner of the pedestal. On the wall approximately seven feet behind the pedestal is a 58” flat screen monitor looping a video titled *Meissen macht mich froh* (German: *Meissen makes me glad*). On the wall to the left of the pedestal is a smaller 42” flat screen monitor looping a video titled *Thank you. Have a nice day. (Part II)*. The gummy bears are all abstracted, much as the actual small fruit gelatin-based gummy bears appear with one small addition, they all have butt cheeks. The first gummy bear “*Kinder Froh*,” (German: “*Children Happy*”) sits erect in the traditional pose, the second, “*Qu’est-ce que c’est?*” (French: “*What’s that?*”) has a slight twist, the third, “*Coquette*,” faces the opposite direction and is leaning to the side, and the last, “*Schadenfreude*,” (German: “*Malicious Joy*”) is slightly bent over.



Figure 24. Michelle Florence, “*Kinder Froh Series*: ‘*Kinder Froh*,’ ‘*Qu’est-ce que c’est?*’ ‘*Coquette*,’ ‘*Schadenfreude*,’ *Self Portrait No. 10*,” Porcelain, polished white nylon plastic, mixed media, (3”x5½”x3”). 2018.



Figure 25. Michelle Florence, “Kinder Froh Series: ‘Kinder Froh,’ ‘Qu’est-ce que c’est?’ ‘Coquette,’ ‘Schadenfreude,’ Self Portrait No. 10,” Porcelain, polished white nylon plastic, mixed media, (3”x5½”x3”). Detail. 2018.

As a child visiting relatives in Germany in the early 1980’s Haribo brand gummy bears were an exotic treat and the slogan “Haribo macht Kinder froh – und Erwachsene ebenso,” (German: “Haribo makes children happy— and adults as well”) was one of the first German phrases I learned. Haribo is an acronym of Hans Riegel, Bonn, the name and German home city of the inventor of gummy bears. The German origin of both gummy bears and Meissen porcelain is reflective of my own history having been born in Germany and still identifying myself by my German heritage. As a self-portrait these gummy bears reflect a sweet nostalgia that is broken by the brutal truth: now that I am an adult, I really don’t like the taste of gummy bears. Just as I am no longer enamored with the idea of being an artist in the role I first found so appealing; the academic professional bound to studio and gallery. The names and poses of the four gummy bears are part of a narrative that reveals my own malicious joy at my ass-backward naiveté. The gummy bears and their little bottoms also reveal that after three years of graduate school I have learned to be more multiplicitous, abstract and restrained with my contentiousness. The wider social

commentary is tied with “Coquette’s” pondering of the video on the 58” flat screen, wherein the narcissism of the piece itself becomes reflective of society as a whole.

The video, *Meissen macht mich froh*, pushes my appropriation of the luxury aesthetic beyond visual vernacular into actually integrating my brand as an artist into that of an already established luxury brand. The imagery and text of the video are drawn directly from Meissen’s website, <https://www.meissen.com/>. Around ten years ago under the direction of chief executive, Christian Kurtzke, the 300-year-old porcelain manufacture expanded its offerings through “Meissen Couture” to include a whole range of luxury items from furniture and exclusive fabrics to haute couture dresses and bags.¹⁰ Mirroring other luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton, Meissen also began to collaborate with established artists such as ceramicist Chris Antemann. The content of Antemann’s work as well as much Meissen’s offerings is historically and traditionally specific to Meissen and is marketed to resonate with the affluent, culturally sophisticated connoisseur. Like Bugs Bunny on a Rubenesque horse singing Wagner, fine porcelain gummy bear figurines and pendants with cute little butt cheeks undermine the subjective exclusivity of luxury with a visual vocabulary that can be understood and appreciated by all. Likewise, my process undermines the productive exclusivity of both the artist and the luxury brand. Through the digital creation of art objects and the utilization of services offered by on-line 3D printing companies such as Shapeways.com the production and acquisition of artwork is open to a broader consumer base without the burden of studio overhead or the fame dependent, elusive corporate sponsorship of a luxury brand. The video *Thank you. Have a nice day. (Part II)*, shows both pendants and figurines for sale on the “Yours Truly MF” storefront on Shapeways.com and offers viewers what I consider this exhibition’s final, most emphatic words: “Buy Now.”

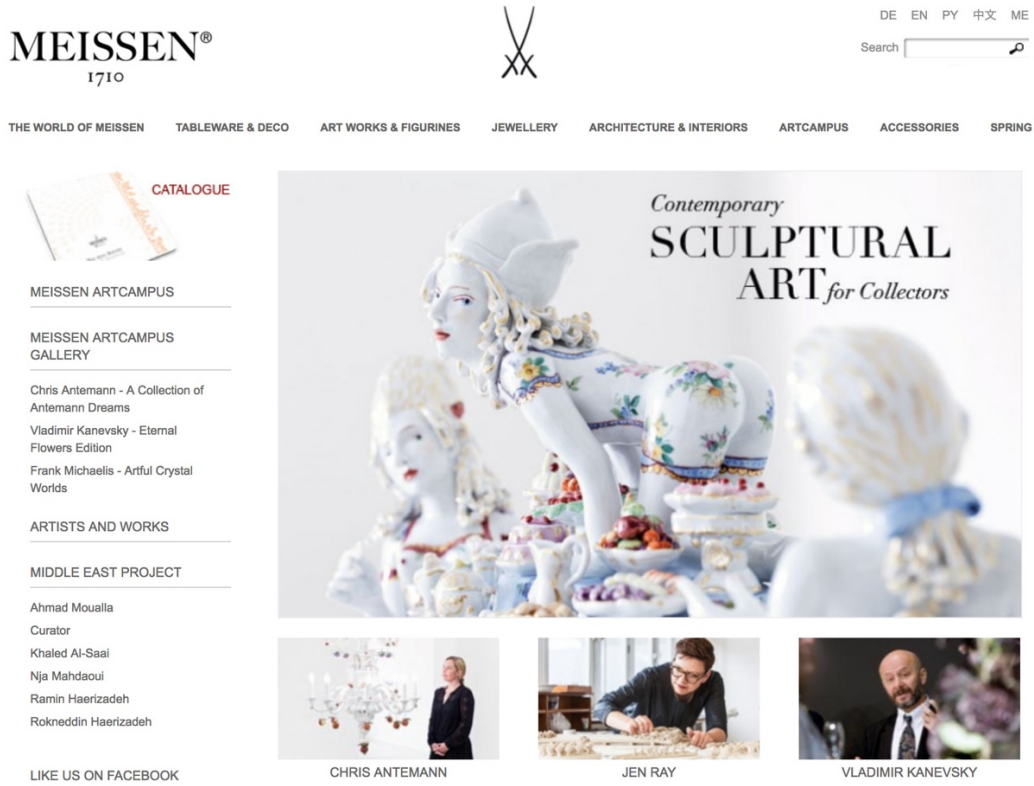


Figure 26. Meissen Artcampus featuring Chris Antemann, Screenshot. 2017.

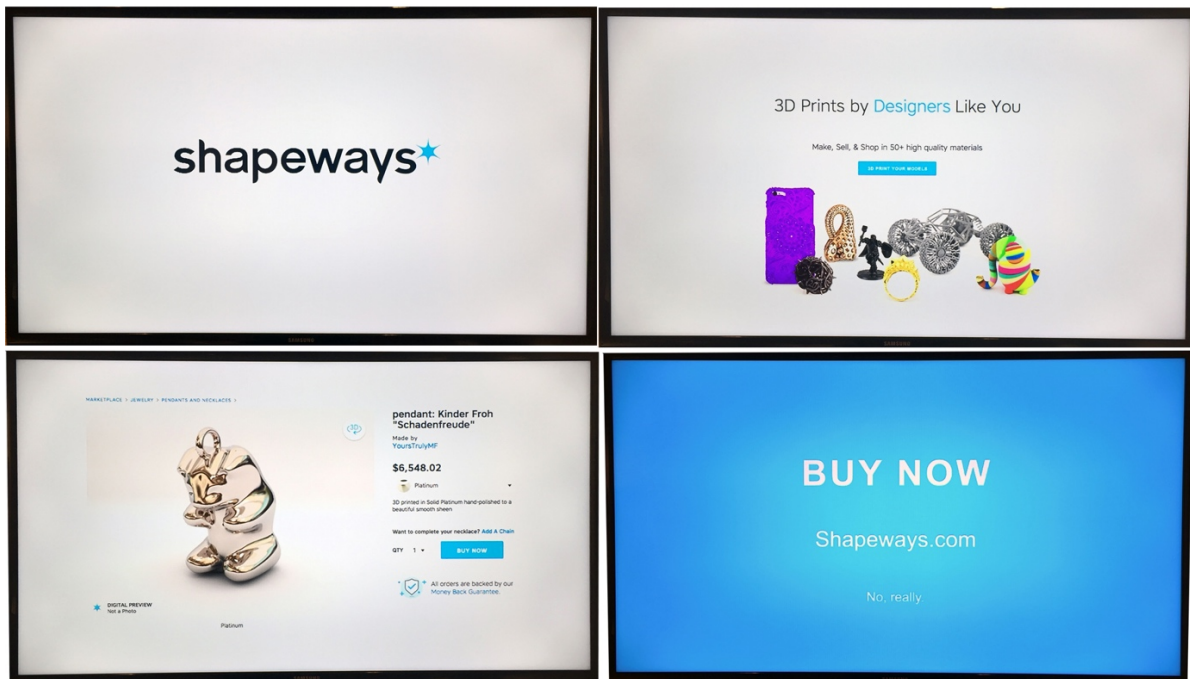


Figure 27. Michelle Florence. "Thank you. Have a nice day. (Part II)," Video, 2018.

CONCLUSION

Consumerism and commodification in art are nothing new and Thank you. Have a nice day. (Part II) echoes its predecessor (Part 1), in undermining the implied exclusivity of Meissen's marketing and manufacturing process. Nevertheless, as modes of consumerism and commodification Etsy and Shapeways represent two different means to the same end; empowering creativity. Etsy's origin and claim to fame is in its craft oriented community and marketplace providing a venue for those interested in unique handmade products. Shapeways in contrast empowers individual creativity exclusively through technology and ostensibly the absence of the hand. The evolution of my process from traditional studio practices to the completely "hands-off" digital creation and production of work may seem contradictory to the romanticized ethos of an artist but I have no qualms exchanging my serrated rib for a computer mouse because in the execution of my creative ideas both are equally viable tools. The latter, however, opens new opportunities for expression and greater economic freedom from the traditional paradigm. At the conclusion of this exhibition the "Yours Truly MF" storefront on Etsy will be removed. The "Yours Truly MF" storefront on Shapeways will remain open and I look forward to updating it with new work in the near future.

In many respects this exhibition echoes the sentiments of Yeats' "Circus Animal's Desertion." In the course of its creation Yours Truly MF has been a self-reflective epitaph marking the end of my endeavors in academia and perhaps the art world at large. As an emerging artist, a traditional studio practice within the backward economic system of the professional artist bound to academic institution and gallery is no longer financially viable. In the words of William Deresiewicz, "A new paradigm is emerging... one that's in the process of reshaping what artists are: how they work, train, trade, collaborate, think of themselves and are thought of—even what art is..."¹¹ My circus animals are part of that process, blurring the lines delineating the roles of both art and artist. In a world characterized by megalomaniacal leaders, fake news, and ever growing economic inequity they offer both self-reflection and social commentary.

They question contemporary ideals of affluence and exclusivity through examining the visual vocabulary of art as product and challenge the aesthetic of affluence in which they may exist. Their crude but classy assertion is a celebration of my belief in the “notion of ‘art’ as such—that sacred spiritual substance” that Deresiewicz laments is being lost.¹² While I cannot presume to be anywhere near the level of mastery that Yeats was with his medium, in reflecting on my own inspirations I can think of no better way to close this chapter of my life than with his words:

Those masterful images because complete
 Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
 A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
 Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
 Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
 Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone,
 I must lie down where all the ladders start
 In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

—last stanza, “The Circus Animal’s Desertion,” by William Butler Yeats¹³

ENDNOTES

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13. W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, (Wordsworth Poetry Library, 2008). 286.